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ENTRANCE TO THE KITCHEN GARDEN AT MOUNT VERNON

## Martha Washington's Gardens

BY HAROLD DONALDSON EBERLEIN

**A**N old garden is full of subtle witchery. It seems to be peopled, in a peculiarly living way, by the memories of those who long since tended it and had a gentle delight therein—presences, it may be, nameless to us but all-pervasive. And the spell of the garden is the more potent the more it recalls well-known and honored personages who once frequented it.

A garden is an intimate reflection of personality. And it continues to hold

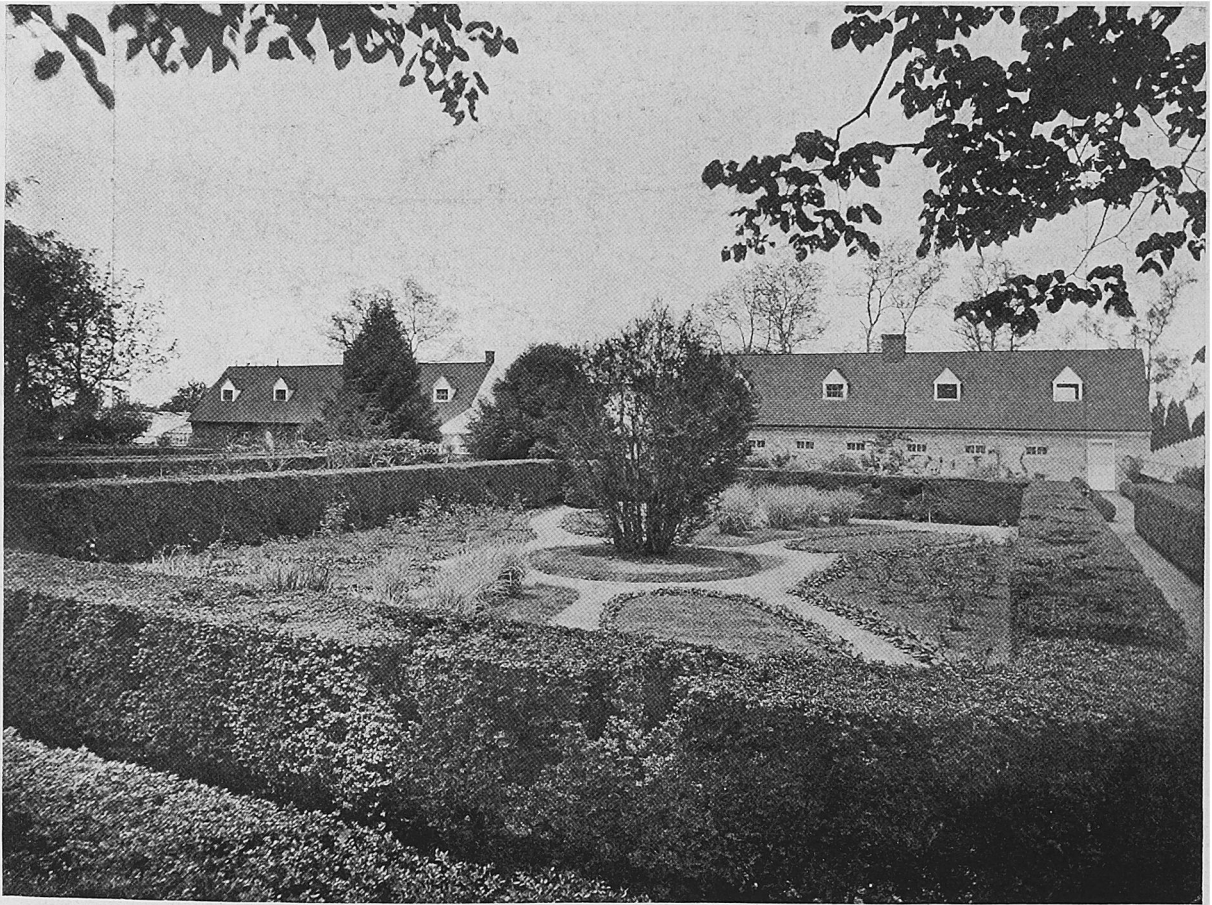
hint of its makers and its occupants years after they have passed away and left only the memories of their presence as a kind of intangible but none the less real bond between themselves and posterity. Anyone who has been much in old gardens cannot but be sensible of this. Those who know them not by long acquaintance, and have not perceived for themselves the manifold reflections of bygone personality they reveal, in small and subtle ways that almost baffle exact

definition, will have to accept the foregoing statement on faith. It is not a thing to be argued about nor to be proved by mathematical exactitudes. Full understanding comes only through familiarity with such gardens. The very fact of the spell's existence, however, is enough to account for our interest in the gardens associated with certain personalities, whether we stop to analyze the cause of that interest or not.

Martha Washington as an expression of human personality has suffered nearly as much as her most illustrious spouse at the hands of the popular school historian. If the Nineteenth Century text-book writers, with their mischievous obsession for "genteel" Victorian artificiality, have habitually portrayed Washington himself to the budding conception of youth as a kind of dehumanized iceberg devoid of all the ordinary passions and

frailties and all the little personal habits that enter into the complex of character and impart color to individuality, they no less insistently portrayed Martha as a colorless, clinging-vine lady, a very impersonation of that simpering vacuity displayed by the impassive personage graven on the fashion plates of Godey's Lady's Book. It is comforting to realize that all such distorted, stilted presentations of Martha Washington are utterly false and misleading, and it is a relief to think of her in her garden, culling flowers for the house or simples for the winter's store, and grubbing in the earth with her own hands. It brings her infinitely nearer to us as a creature of real flesh and blood.

It is quite true that the actual documentary and other specific evidences with reference to her gardening activities are scant, but the presumptive evidences



THE GARDEN AT MOUNT VERNON LOOKING TOWARD THE SERVANT QUARTERS

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THE OLD BOX HEDGE, MOUNT VERNON



are so numerous and so strong that, taken in connection with certain indisputable facts, it is not difficult to reconstruct with reasonable accuracy the circumstances of her garden interests.

With four gardens we naturally associate Martha Washington—the garden of her Six-chimney House, the Custis home, at Williamsburg; the garden at Mount Vernon; the garden of the Hasbrouck house, the headquarters at Newburgh, where she spent the greater part of the summer of 1783; and the garden of the Morris house, facing the Market Square, in Germantown, where she lived during part of the summer of 1794, when a recurrence was expected of the yellow-fever epidemic of 1793. Of the garden of the Robert Morris house in Philadelphia, the Executive Mansion while Philadelphia was the National Capital, no trace remains. We know only that it was an ample walled enclosure, well stocked with fruit and shade trees and abounding in a variety of flowers and blossoming shrubs.

The old Six-chimney House at Williamsburg has long since disappeared along with many another of the old mansions wherein lived the worthies who made that stately little capital so gay. Near its site, however, still stands a yew tree which, so persistent and unanimous tradition has it, Martha Washington planted with her own hands. If tradition be true, and there is every reason to give it credence, this is the earliest earnest of her concern in garden care and making and an indication of her bent.

It was Mrs. Washington's wont, when circumstances permitted, to spend whatever time she could with the General at headquarters. Thus, during the long-continued occupancy of the Hasbrouck house at Newburgh, it happened that she lived there in the summer of 1783 until the middle of August. Here we have a very definite evidence of her horticultural activity. Lossing is authority for the statement that "Mrs. Washington had a passion for gardening and her summer residence at Newburgh allowed her to indulge it." On the slope in front of

headquarters, where the ground fell away towards the Hudson, "she had a rich garden of vegetables and flowers in which her own hands were often employed." Another careful chronicler adds that the garden "under her skillful hands, bloomed like the desert of the Scriptures" and continues that "those who remember the grounds as they appeared forty years ago [this was written in 1897] recall rows of bricks, still standing, that once formed the borders of Lady Washington's flower-beds."

To the Germantown garden she came too late—it was July 30th when the family moved out from the city—to do any planting, and as they stayed only till September 20th, there was no time to do anything but enjoy what was already there. Although this garden has undergone some changes since the Washingtons occupied the premises, the trim box edges, coeval with the house, still mark off the borders of the old-fashioned flower plots from which Martha Washington doubtless gathered blooms for indoor brightness, or upon which she gazed as she leaned from the little window on the stair landing—this incident well-founded local tradition vouches for—to talk with her neighbor, Mrs. Brinhurst, in the adjoining garden, perhaps about flowers and garden lore, as the latter lady tended her beds.

Of Mrs. Washington's gardening occupations at Mount Vernon we have no explicit documentary proof, but there is such an abundance of inferential evidence of the most plausible and reliable character that we cannot ignore it, even if we would, and we are, therefore, quite justified in believing that she had an active share in what went on in her own particular horticultural sphere. One feels well assured of this in remembering the Newburgh garden at the Hasbrouck house on the Hudson. Had she not possessed a strong garden instinct and inclination and, at the same time, the requisite knowledge she would never have made the venture. Nor, without the necessary garden sense and skill on her



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THE GARDEN AT MOUNT VERNON AS SEEN FROM THE NELLIE CUSTIS SCHOOL-HOUSE

part would the garden have been the success it was. Furthermore, we may reasonably assume that any normally constituted woman of the old-fashioned type with a genuine love of flowers and the skill to make a garden, would not be content to make one isolated effort and then drop all further concern in that direction. As we very well know, Martha Washington was not a flighty person.

Allusion has just been made to "her own particular horticultural sphere." It will be well, therefore, to define explicitly just what was the particular horticultural sphere of any Colonial Virginia housekeeper at the head of a large plantation with all its manifold demands that had to be met chiefly by home-supplied resources; and, further, it is necessary to define just what came within Mrs. Washington's horticultural sphere as mistress of Mount Vernon. In this respect, as in most others, her activities have been so overshadowed by those of the

General that we are too apt to lose sight of the tremendously important part she played in the life of the household.

Martha Washington was a woman who looked well into the ways of her establishment and was much pre-occupied with the details and management of domestic affairs. In this respect she exactly complemented the habits of the General who was accustomed to bestow meticulous care upon ordering the least minutiae in the affairs of his estate. Now it was one of the most valued accomplishments of the competent housewife of the period to know all the properties and uses of all the garden herbs and simples employed not only in the arts of cookery but also in the preparation of dyes and for medicinal purposes. In this particular, at least, we may be sure that she, who kept such a close oversight of every least detail of household economy, had an accurate knowledge of and a keen interest in what was planted and produced in

her garden of herbs. And herbs, be it remembered, included not only the savory pot herbs most familiar to us now, but also many other plants commonly accredited to the flower garden. Marigold petals, to cite but one instance, were often used to flavor and color soups. All of these plants and blossoms had to be gathered and stored for use. Those needed for the decoction of dyes alone must have required considerable care on a plantation where so much weaving was carried on as at Mount Vernon.

The General evinced the liveliest solicitude about the laying out and improvement of the grounds and gardens, the setting out of hedges, and the transplanting of trees, many of which he fetched from the adjacent woodlands wherever his experienced eye had marked specimens suitable to his purpose. His diaries and letters alone, quite apart from all other sources, amply attest his enthusiasm in this work and enable us to reconstruct

the whole process by which the final scheme was gradually realized. As in all other matters involving building or laying out, he carefully drew his own garden plans. This scheme, among other features, provided at the north side of the west lawn an extensive flower garden laid off in box-bordered beds, and a corresponding vegetable garden on the south side with the same formal divisions and outline.

But all these works show Washington's activities to have lain mainly in the larger and more constructive aspects of landscape gardening. Minutely specific as are the entries anent trees and shrubs, hedges and general plans, there is practically no mention of flowers. The inference is plain. The flower garden was clearly regarded as Mrs. Washington's especial province. The master of Mount Vernon had laid it out and supplied the general plan, but there the direct and intimate connection apparently stopped.



VIEW OF THE GARDEN AT MOUNT VERNON

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If the General had given it his own constant personal attention, we should unquestionably find more detailed reference to it.

Returning to Mount Vernon after the second presidential term was ended, Mrs. Washington wrote Mrs. Knox:—"I am again fairly settled down to the pleasant duties of an old-fashioned Virginia house-keeper, steady as a clock, busy as a bee, and cheerful as a cricket."

That part of her beloved home duties lay in the supervision of her flower garden we can scarcely doubt. The presence of a steward to relieve her of some of her more onerous household responsibilities and allow her leisure to receive the numerous guests who flocked to Mount Vernon left her sufficient time to indulge her

garden leanings. There seems to be every reason to justify Miss Wharton's words when she says, in the light of extracts from contemporary letters and memoranda of the personal recollections of relatives and visitors:—"We seem to hear her voice in the hall or garden, directing her numerous servants, or giving the gardeners orders about her favorite rose bushes, while she waits for her husband to come home to breakfast." Despite the paucity of direct allusion to Martha Washington as a maker of gardens, we are told enough to show her love for them, and confirmatory circumstances convince us that Martha's memory no less than the General's should be perpetually linked with the grounds and garden of Mount Vernon.

## To a Sonnet

BY FITZROY CARRINGTON

Sonnet, forgive me, if with hands untaught,  
Ofttimes I try your magic web to weave;  
And, having made the pattern, half believe  
Your melody is wedded to my thought.  
Spirit of Beauty! Though you are not bought  
By love or labour, without love you die;  
Then flee me not, for well you know that I  
Have ever all I loved best to you brought.

Exacting Mistress! Be, as you have been,  
My solace and my torment; let me live  
To wear the laurel you would gladly give,  
Though not yet on your lover's brow 'tis seen.  
Sonnet I love you—yet I hate you too!  
Love me a little—you shall find me true.